

Book Review | The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss by Marco Revelli

In The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss, Marco Revelli explores the definitions, historical development and electoral geography of populism across much of Europe and the United States, focusing particularly on the relationship between populist politics and neoliberalism. While the book provides a wealth of detail on the ideology and history of populism and is particularly strong in examining Italy and its various populist vehicles, its reiteration of familiar themes in the literature risks the book falling behind the cutting edge of populism studies, writes Ben Margulies.

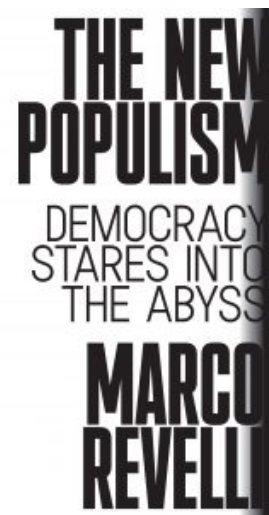


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***The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss*, Marco Revelli (trans. by David Broder). Verso. 2019.**

Sometimes, it feels like populism has become its own non-fiction genre, like true crime or travel writing. Publishers have issued several primers on the topic in recent years, from Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's [entry](#) in the *Very Short Introduction* series, to Jan-Werner Müller's [What is Populism?](#) and John Judis's [The Populist Explosion](#). Some works try to examine the electoral aspects of transnational populism, like Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's [Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism](#), while others examine populism as a style or manner of campaigning, like Benjamin Moffitt's [The Global Rise of Populism](#). In such an atmosphere of intense examination, wide-ranging research and prolific explanations, each new work on populism emerges to an immediate question – does this book tell us anything we didn't already know? Does it offer a new angle, a new perspective, a new conception on the problem? And, given how mutable the term 'populism' is, does the book even describe the correct subject?

Marco Revelli's book, [The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss](#), was published in English translation from the original Italian by Verso in 2019. For a book of about 200 pages, it is an ambitious work, covering the definitions, historical development and electoral geography of populism across the United States and much of Europe. However, for all its ambition and the author's obvious knowledge, the book does not convincingly answer those questions that works on populism cannot evade.



This does not mean that the work is at all uninteresting. Revelli is a good writer, and his book provides a wealth of detail on populist ideology and history, as well as its varying national-level expressions and contexts. He dissects the lie at the heart of the term 'anti-politics', which is, of course, just a form of politics (17–20). He also highlights the role of dealignment in the rise of populism, developing the point made by Peter Mair [in his later work](#).

Revelli hints repeatedly at the idea that the relationship between populist parties and neoliberal elites is not as antagonistic as their respective rhetoric suggests. One especially interesting section discusses Matteo Renzi, Italy's centre-left Prime Minister from 2014 to 2016. Revelli describes Renzi as essaying a 'populism from above', attempting to use the styles and framing of populism in order to build popular support for what was essentially an orthodox neoliberal programme. Renzi's purpose was 'to try to build a popular and electoral base through a typically populist use of rhetoric and (apparently) transgressive behaviours that serve to legitimise ("down below") policies which substantively conform to political inclinations willed and dictated "from above"' (184). Revelli revisits this theme in his conclusion, where he points out that European elites seem far more frightened of a redistributive left than they do of populists of the right, about whom they 'fake fear and indignation [...] and stigmatise them with anathemas which – precisely because of where the preaching is coming from – merely strengthen their following' (204).

The chief problem with *The New Populism* is that interesting themes like this only occupy a few pages. As stated above, any book entering the crowded shelves of populism studies needs to tell us something new, and to make sure to closely define 'populism', a term which has many definitions. Revelli falls short on both.

Does *The New Populism* actually talk about populism? The first chapter certainly examines the history of its definition, and proffers one of its own. Revelli cites three of 'what Christa Deiwiks calls populism's core characteristics' (14): 'the supreme paramount centrality assumed there by the reference to the people' (14); 'the idea of betrayal' (15); and 'the imaginary of upheaval: chasing out the usurper-oligarchy', an act usually accomplished by the charismatic leader (16).

So far, so good. Revelli also acknowledges that populism can attach itself to leftist/redistributionist or rightist/ethnonationalist views of the world, citing Judis's conception of leftist populism as 'dyadic' (because it focuses on the people versus elite cleavage) and rightist populism as 'triadic' (because it imagines a second enemy of the people, a despised outgroup) (27).

However, once the first couple of chapters have passed, Revelli largely abandons left-wing populism entirely. Most of the text deals with Donald Trump, Brexit, Marine Le Pen and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which are all right-wing outfits. There is little on Podemos, Syriza, Corbynism or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and only scant references to Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. So, the 'new populism' turns out to be largely right-wing populism (or the populist radical right). Only in discussing his native Italy does Revelli deal with non-right-wing populisms (and then Revelli does not discuss Italy's largest and most successful populist party, the *Lega*).

So effectively, this book, like Mudde's recent [The Far Right Today](#), is about the populist radical right more than populism in general, at least beyond its first couple of chapters. There's nothing wrong with writing primarily about the radical right group of populist parties, but Revelli does not really explain why he has chosen to do so, and to exclude most left-wing populists.

Whether one writes primarily about the radical right or populism, or both, a new work in a highly active field of research should advance something novel, or at least a really perceptive and thorough examination of what has gone before. Mudde's *The Far Right Today* does the latter – the book doesn't describe any original research, but instead gives a broad overview of the topic, while introducing certain key ideas that are still newcomers to the public debate. Mudde talks about how the far right has 'mainstreamed' in the 21st century as part of the 'fourth wave' of the far right (20), and how centre-right parties have themselves radicalised.

Revelli comes close to doing something similar with his examination of 'governmental populism' (184), but most of his work covers older ground. A lot of the text is given over to discussions of the electoral demography and geography of populism and its association with the 'left-behind' voters of various peripheral regions and marginalised classes. This tale has been recited many times over the past few years – indeed, [to the point of parody](#). (Another problem is that Revelli loves discussing how voting patterns can be best described by maps, but has not included a single map.)

Furthermore, Revelli's insistence on the importance of electoral geography conceals the fact that individual radical-right voters [often don't vote on economic grounds](#) or because of fears of [economic competition from immigrants](#). By focusing so much on the geographic arena of radical-right voting, Revelli risks the *ecological fallacy* of assuming that collective markers of vote choice explain why individuals make political decisions. (An example of this is the assumption that, [because a constituency with a Labour MP voted for Brexit, Labour voters in that seat must all be in favour of Brexit, even though the majority of Labour voters supported Remain](#).) Revelli spends most of his chapter on the US discussing geographical and economic inequality; his discussion of the racism and xenophobia of Trumpism forms not much more than an afterthought, though [many political scientists](#) believe that racism or hostility to immigration is a more convincing, or at least more direct, explanation for Trump's victory.

Revelli attempts to define a 'neo-populism', which to him is effectively a neoliberalism-influenced populism, 'in close connection with the neoliberal wave that characterised the turn of the century', from which it draws 'rhetorical and programmatic assonances and inclinations' and avoids existing institutions and collectivities (33). He also identifies this with the decline of organised labour and the left ('the "latest generation of populism" [...] is situated in close causal connection with the historic defeat that "labour" suffered [...] and the catastrophic abandonment of the popular classes by their own political representatives' (35)). But these themes are not very well developed; Revelli only returns to them occasionally, while discussing electoral geography and his version of the 'left-behind' thesis in great depth.

The New Populism is not a bad introduction to populist theory. It's a great place to learn about voting patterns, and its section on Italy and its various populist vehicles is genuinely interesting and informative. But Revelli says little here that cannot be found in other works, and his embrace of the 'left-behind thesis' risks this book falling behind the cutting edge of populist studies. The great lesson of the populist era is that the 'same old' will not succeed, and unfortunately, this book has too much of the 'same old'.

This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published by the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).

About the author

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